

Constipation

What is constipation?

Constipation means that a person has three bowel movements or fewer in a week. The stool is hard and dry. Sometimes it is painful to pass. You may feel “draggy” and full. Some people think they should have a bowel movement every day. That is not really true. There is no “right” number of bowel movements. Each person’s body finds its own normal number of bowel movements. It depends on the food you eat, how much you exercise, and other things.

At one time or another, almost everyone gets constipated. In most cases, it lasts for a short time and is not serious. When you understand what causes constipation, you can take steps to prevent it.

What causes constipation?

Hard and dry stools occur if the colon absorbs too much water or if the colon’s muscle contractions are slow, causing the stool to move through the colon too slowly. Common causes of constipation are: inadequate fluid intake, lack of exercise, inadequate dietary fiber, irritable bowel syndrome and some medications.

What can I do about constipation?

Changing what you eat and drink and how much you exercise will help relieve and prevent constipation.

Here are some steps you can take.

1. Eat more fiber.

Fiber helps form soft, bulky stool. It is found in many vegetables, fruits, and grains. Be sure to add fiber a little at a time, so your body gets used to it slowly. Limit foods that have little or no fiber such as ice cream, cheese, meat, snacks like chips and pizza, and processed foods such as instant mashed potatoes or already-prepared frozen dinners.

2. Drink plenty of water and other liquids such as fruit and vegetable juices and clear soups. Liquid helps keep the stool soft and easy to pass, so it’s important to drink enough fluids. Try not to drink liquids that contain caffeine or alcohol. Caffeine and alcohol tend to dry out your digestive system.

3. Get enough exercise.

Regular exercise helps your digestive system stay active and healthy. You don’t need to become a great athlete. A 20-to30-minute walk every day may help.

4. Allow yourself enough time to have a bowel movement.

Sometimes we feel so hurried that we don’t pay attention to our body’s needs. Make sure you don’t ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.

5. Use laxatives only if a doctor says you should.

Laxatives are medicines that will make you pass a stool. Most people who are mildly constipated do not need laxatives. However, if you are doing all the right things and you are still constipated, your doctor may recommend laxatives for a limited time. Your doctor will tell you if you need a laxative and what type is best for you. Laxatives come in many forms: liquid, chewing gum, pills, and powder that you mix with water, for example.

6. Check with your doctor about any medicines you take.

Some medicines can cause constipation. They include calcium pills, pain pills with codeine in them, some antacids, iron pills, diuretics (water pills), and medicines for depression. If you take medicine for another problem, be sure to ask your provider whether it could cause constipation.

Points to remember

- Constipation affects almost everyone at one time or another.
- Many people think they're constipated when they're really not.
- In most cases, following these simple tips will help prevent constipation:
 - Eat a variety of foods, especially beans, bran, whole grains, and fresh fruits and vegetables.
 - Drink plenty of liquids.
 - Exercise regularly.
 - Don't ignore the urge to have a bowel movement.
 - Understand that normal bowel habits are different for everyone.
- Medicines that you take for another problem might cause constipation.